

Observations of a Halfway Happy Hopper by everybreatheeverymove

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Summary:

Prompt: Mike and Eleven kissing, and Hopper sees them.

When they're thirteen, Hopper doesn't worry much when he catches them locked in an embrace by the front door. It lasts a little longer than it should but it doesn't trouble him. Things change as they get older, though.

But, when they're twenty-three, and they build a home, Hopper no longer has anything to worry about.

Observations of a Halfway Happy Hopper

Author's Note:

I took the prompt, spun it around a little bit, flipped it on its head, thought too much about it... and we ended up here. It's a fluffy mess but I have absolutely no regrets. Shameless goodness here, folks. Hope you all enjoy.

And if you wanted to let me know if I got Hopper right, that'd be much appreciated. :)

- Jo.

When they're thirteen, he catches them in an embrace by the front door. It lasts a little longer than it should, but Hopper doesn't worry too much.

Mike had come over to help her with her reading, and Hopper hadn't batted an eye when they'd ventured into her bedroom to work. Door pulled ajar, chipper voices carrying out into the living room where he was settled in watching a game, he hadn't thought twice about leaving them alone.

At thirteen years old, there aren't many shenanigans they can get into with a parent one room over. It's not like the door is closed. It's not like they're that way inclined anyway.

They're still kids for the most part - still playing that weird Dungeons and Demons game (or whatever it was called), still using their pocket money down at the arcade.

He likes to think they'll stay this way for a while, for another year at least, that they'll keep their youth and keep playing nerdy board games. But he was that age once, too, and he's not delusional enough to think they aren't at least curious about certain things.

"Mike kissed me."

She tells him this one day, when they're sat at the dinner table in the

cabin. He has a mouthful of broccoli and peas when she says it, and he nearly chokes.

“When?”

“Last year.” El ducks her gaze, almost timid, but he can see the clear smile that starts to form on her lips as she pushes at the peas on her plate with her fork, shuffling them around absentmindedly, “Two days ago.”

Two days ago, it'd been the Snowball; that goddamn middle school dance she'd been talking about for well over a year, that goddamn dance the boy had asked her to last year and hadn't attended without her.

(Hopper remembers the night of the '83 Snowball quite clearly because it consisted of, for the most part, Eleven channelling Mike through some miraculous combination of black cloth and television static. Apparently, the boy had opted to stay home instead of going to the dance, and, as Eleven had told him once she'd wiped away her tears and cried into her pillow, it was because of her. Not because he blamed her, but because he refused to go without her. Because he was waiting for her.) (Hopper had felt for the boy that night.)

He's not sure when or where she learnt what a kiss was, if she even knew what it meant (when well-intentioned), but he's pretty damn certain it has something to do with those soaps she watches all the time. They're setting her up for disappointment, that much he's sure of.

“OK.” He can't really say much more than that. It's not that he's surprised, or that he's unnerved, he's just... fine with it.

Mike kissed her last year before Hopper became her legal guardian. Mike kissed her last year before Hopper was someone of importance in her life. He has no right to be mad.

He's her dad now (or at the very least the closest thing she's ever gonna get to having a normal parental figure in her life). And, while he's not thrilled, he can't be mad at them for kissing two days ago either. (He's well aware he's to blame for keeping them apart for so

long.)

They're thirteen, and any kisses shared between them are harmless, fleeting, and Hopper doesn't think much of their closeness.

Only, when they'd finished working and Mike had been on his way out, they'd stopped in the front doorway and spoken in such low voices that Hopper couldn't help but want to eavesdrop. There was something so strangely charming about the way they interacted.

"I'll see you next week?"

Eleven nods, and before Hopper can even flip the page of the newspaper he's pretending to read, she's pulling the boy in for a hug. She's just a couple inches shorter than Mike, and it's noticeable when the boy wraps his arms around her waist and pulls her into him.

They don't talk, and Hopper's curiosity peaks when he hears the smallest of whimpers from the girl. It's more of a squeak than a sob though and, despite his conscience telling him to let them be, he cranes his neck from his spot on the sofa and glances over at them.

He can't be sure if they're kissing, but from the way El is clutching at the boy's sides, fingers digging in, and the way Mike's hands are cupping her face, threading through her hair, Hopper thinks it's safe to say that this is more than just a hug.

They're thirteen though, and he isn't mad.

But when Mike leaves a moment later, after offering up a quick goodbye to the man himself, Hopper pulls up the girl when she's on her way over to the fridge. He stops in front of the stove, one hand on his hip, his face the picture of authority, "No more of that, okay?"

He's her dad now, so he has to lay down some ground rules. (Well, some more.)

"Ruler number four. No kissing in the house."

She just stares up at him for a minute (but it feels like an hour), and just when Hopper thinks she's going to fight him on this, her eyes roll and she shrugs. "Fine."

“Fine?”

“Fine.” El nods, and he’s proud of himself for winning this round, “We’ll just kiss at Mike’s house.”

She ventures off then, after stealing an apple from out of the fridge, and Hopper is left with a headache.

Damn kids.

When they’re fourteen, he realises he has to crank things up a notch. They’re outside the high school, where he’s parked waiting to drive El home before he returns to work, and Mike’s hands are caging his daughter in against the front of the old building.

There’s nothing really alarming about it, and, from the way El is giggling and looking up at the growing boy as though he’s the best thing since sliced bread, Hopper doesn’t think he needs to be loading up his shotgun anytime soon.

He tries not to watch them, tries to pretend he isn’t sat just twenty feet away from where his teenage daughter’s quite clearly flirting with her boyfriend.

He’s not fuming as a father should probably be, but he’s still relieved when Mike lifts one hand from off of the wall. Only that hand finds the side of El’s face within seconds, and suddenly they’re kissing. And Hopper has to look away, avoid the temptation to honk the horn and tear them apart.

They deserve to spend some time together, right? After all they’ve been through, they deserve a little freedom, right? Wrong. He’s pretty sure El’s gonna end up spending most of the weekend at the Wheeler kid’s house anyway, with their band of misfits dorks, so he’s not even a little bit sorry when he slams his fist down on the horn and watches as their jump apart.

Their foreheads are still touching though (he’s pretty sure), and El’s hands hold onto the collars of Mike’s windbreaker as though she’s

clinging on for dear life. She says something to him, but Hopper can't lipread, and soon enough she's bounding over to the Police truck with a smile on her face, leaving an awestruck Wheeler in her wake.

He doesn't even dare to ask.

"Can't you two do that when you're inside the school?" He grumbles, watching as she straps herself in, pulling the seatbelt tight, "Or does it annoy your friends as much as it annoys me?"

El grins, leaning over to toss her bag onto the back seat, "Mike says we can't do it in school."

"Well, when Mike is Chief of Police, or when he has a daughter then he can have a say." Hopper snorts, "Just get it outta your system before you come home, okay?"

"He says we can't because teachers don't allow it and otherwise we'd get detention." She informs him, "And he doesn't think you want me to get detention."

"He's not wrong." Hopper admits with a slight tilt of his head, "How about you just don't do it at all then?"

"Ever?"

"At school, no."

"But on the weekends?" El asks, hopeful, and he nods in confirmation with a sigh and 'sure, kid', and she leans back in the passenger seat, content, "Halfway happy."

Good.

"Mike asked me to be his girlfriend."

She tells him this later, when she's mid-homework and her hands are toying with a wooden ruler, and Hopper's just a little bit confused. He'd assumed they were already official, or going steady, or whatever the hell it was the kids called it these days.

"And what did you say?"

She shrugs, nonchalant but he can tell she's bursting with glee on the inside. She's never been very good at hiding her emotions, "I said yes," she starts, "and then I asked him to be my boyfriend because you say everything is a two-way street."

(He won't lie and say he isn't proud of her for that.)

"Good." Hoppers licks his forefinger and his thumb, turns the page of the case-file he's working on. "As long as you're happy."

"I am." El's voice is soft, sweet, and he can't help but smile, even while staring down at the mugshot of a local store thief, "Full happy."

Goddamn kids.

When they're seventeen, he's become accustomed to always seeing them in such close proximity to each other. They're never far, rarely apart, and he's fine with it. But he's thrown when, one night, Flo gets a call from someone down at the quarry who says they saw the Chief's adopted daughter getting into the back of a brown station wagon by the creek.

Instead of loading his shotgun with enough bullets to riddle the Wheeler kid with holes, Hopper just heads down to that place they oh-so-appropriately nicknamed Lover's Lake without a second thought, and he's fuming by the time he spots the car.

At that age, teenagers are crafty, ballsy, and they'll come up with ingenious ways to outsmart their parents and sneak out of the house. At that age, they're knowledgeable and impressionable but all the while aware of the consequences. At that age, they're curious and horny, and Hopper is just about ready to punch someone in the goddamn face.

His clenched fist thumps against the side of the vehicle (about five times), and it takes a few moments and few little high-pitched shrieks from the backseat before someone tosses the door open, making Hopper take a couple steps back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He sounds angrier than he feels, but his face is anything but apologetic, “It’s eleven o’clock at goddamn night on a Monday. What the hell are you doing, kid?”

El is pulling up her socks, right up to her knees, and she settles her gaze on Hopper’s boots.

“Talking.”

“Talking?” He wants to shout, wants to shake some sense into her, but- “Wheeler.”

“Chief.” The damn kid’s head of messy hair is in view now, and Hopper narrows his eyes in on the boy. “We were just- I was-“

“Goddamnit, don’t say another word.” Jim sighs, breathing heavily through his nostrils, and his eyes close for just a second or two, “I don’t wanna hear it. El, grab your crap. I’m taking you home.”

With a small huff, she reaches over to pick up her muddy sneakers, laying a hand on Mike’s wrist. He looks upset and Hopper thinks that he maybe he overestimated the gravity of their little nighttime hangout. (Either that, or Mike’s just being dramatic.)

He gets his answer after a silent car ride home, when El slams the front door shut and stares up at him, clearly irritated.

“What now?” Hopper grimaces, almost mocking, “You mad because I dragged you away from your boyfriend before you could do something stupid?”

“His parents are getting a divorce.”

Oh.

“That’s what we were talking about.” She tells him, and her shoulders drop, “His dad is gonna move out, and his mom is gonna sell the house, and he was crying when he called me earlier.”

“His parents are getting a divorce?”

Shit.

"His parents are getting a divorce." She repeats, again, confirming.

Double shit. "And you were, what, comforting him?"

"Yes." El swallows, and she plops herself down on the sofa, trying to avoid making any furtger noise as to not wake anyone in the house. Joyce and Will were probably already asleep.

(The four of them had only been living together for a few months, after Hopper had finally popped the question and Joyce had finally agreed and they'd finally sorted their shit out.)

"Mike said he loves me."

He'd expected this years ago, and, truthfully, he's surprised it'd taken the Wheeler kid this long to admit it when it'd been clear on his face for five long years. But obviously he's going through some stuff and-

"He said he loves me, and he said he doesn't want to end up like his parents." Her feet kick up on the coffee table and Hopper stands by the sofa, keeping his distance to avoid aggravating her, "He was crying." She closes her eyes, tosses her head back against the cushions, and presses the balls of her hands against her eyes.

"You love him."

She moves her hands from her face an inch, peering up at him through glazed eyes, "Fully."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For thinking you were being normal teenagers when I should know better. Neither one of you is normal. None of you. You know you're special, El, but Mike... Mike isn't just some kid and I think I forget that sometimes. He's good."

"I know." El takes a deep breath, and he's never been more regretful, "That's why I love him. That's why you should, too."

He appreciates the Wheeler kid, he does. He's honestly not sure there

could ever be anyone better suited for his daughter than that nerdy, mop-haired little shit, “I’m sure I will. One day.”

(He won’t admit it until some years later, but Mike Wheeler is the son he never asked for but got nonetheless, the other half of the package deal that Hopper signed for when he adopted Eleven.)

“I’m gonna go find him.”

“What?”

“You said he was upset, right?” She nods, and Hopper messes with the hat in his hands, “Then wake Will up, and help him set up a sleeping bag or whatever in his room, and I’m gonna go find Mike.”

“Thank you.”

Hopper doesn’t reply, but he ruffles her hair, kisses the top of her head, and he’s back out the door before she can stop him.

Fucking kids.

When they’re eighteen, he starts to worry a little bit more.

“Mike asked me to prom.”

She’d told him one time, a couple weeks before homecoming, back when she was still trying to settle on a dress.

“Are you going?” He’d asked, already knowing the answer. He’d slid a plated Eggo across the table, watching as she laid out a napkin.

With a nod, El stabbed the waffle with her fork, “Duh.” She’d bitten at the waffle then, mouth full as she spoke, “Max says that’s when people have sex.”

“Max said what?” He had to stop forgetting to load that freakin’ shotgun.

"That people have sex at homecoming. For the first time." She'd taken another bite, bigger this time, and stood up to discard the rest.

"But you're—" He didn't want to know, he just wanted her to be safe. "Right?"

The girl raised a brow, almost amused at his line of questioning, "I'm fine."

"OK."

Weeks later, he finds her sat alone in the back of the diner. Once Benny's Burgers, the place had been taken over by new management. It was fresher now, much more like a 60s diner.

Or, at least he thinks she's alone. Mike comes out of the bathroom, hands rubbing down his jeans, before Hopper can approach his daughter, and he instead chooses to watch the scene before him.

It's only lately that he's taken in the boy's growth spurt, Mike now standing almost as tall as the man himself. His hair's still a mess though, and Hopper isn't sure how El can see his face half the time.

(He's gonna get him a freakin' hairbrush for Christmas, he's decided.)

He watches as Mike leans over the table, kissing the top of El's head before saying something quiet, just soft enough to make his daughter's face light up, and Hopper has seen enough.

He orders his coffee and pancakes, pretends he doesn't notice when the growing man pulls up beside him.

"Chief."

Mike greets him, and his fingers are tapping some sort of rhythm along the greasy countertop, his wallet on the side.

"Wheeler." Hopper acknowledges him with a nod of the head, "You ready for college?"

He's heading out next week, all set for the University of Indiana. It's not far, and it's not a huge change of scenery. But Mike will be living

in a dorm, and he won't have his friends around, and he won't have El there. (She hasn't decided what she wants for her future yet. And that's fine.)

"Pretty much." His eyebrows are drawn, and he's quite clearly lost in thought. Hopper knows that look.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"You're gonna be okay." He reassures the young man, patting him on the shoulder. He's all lanky arms and awkward posture and freckle-faced and Hopper's still sometimes in disbelief that this is the boy his daughter has chosen to love.

"Thanks." It's sincere, and Hopper's proud to admit he actually kind of loves this kid. He's good.

The waitress reemerges then, and Mike orders a strawberry sundae (and it's obviously for El because it's her favourite), and Hopper isn't ignorant to those little square foil packets in the boy's wallet.

Shit.

"Kid?"

His eyes are still on the condoms, and Mike quite literally freezes up when he catches on to what Hopper is staring at, "Oh."

"We're not gonna have anything to worry about, are we?"

"Well, no." Mike's eyebrows dance, and his face flushes some kind of crimson colour, and Hopper can only chuckle. "I mean- We used-"

"OK."

"OK?"

"Yeah." The chief of police waves a hand, "You're a good kid, I trust you. And I trust her. And I trust you're both smart enough to be smart about these things."

“We are.”

“Good.”

Fucking teenagers.

When they're twenty, they've been living in different cities for roughly two years. Hopper isn't surprised they've made it this far, isn't surprised they've handled the long distance thing impeccably well for two youngsters on the brink of adulthood.

When Mike comes home for Christmas break that second year, he shacks up with Lucas (who's also in town for the holidays) in a nearby hotel. His mom and Holly are in an apartment these days, and Nancy's already called the guest room and, short of staying with his dad and his new girlfriend, renting a hotel room is the best option.

(Lucas says it works out better for him, too. And when they check into their room, he lets slip that he's transferring to U of I next semester and the boys are ecstatic at the prospect of spending more time together.)

Max visits from California, and Dustin comes home from Michigan, and Will pops in from New Jersey, and the whole little nerd squad is back together again.

They're together on Christmas Eve, and a little bit on Christmas, but New Year's eve is the day he can't get the group out of his damn house. Until Joyce tells everyone to go home and get dressed up for the party, for the countdown.

“Mike asked me to move in with him.”

She tells him that afternoon. The boys went back to the hotel to change a couple hours ago, and El has been messing with her hair for a good twenty minutes.

She's been working in the library for well over a year now, and Hopper doesn't think he's ever seen anyone so happy to be surrounded by books all day long. But she still lives with him and Joyce, and Mike has moved into a one-bedroom studio, and he

understands her plight.

The boy's been working in some tech job for a while, and he's making money between classes and Hopper isn't as opposed to the idea of her moving out there to live with him as he thinks he should be.

It's risky, letting her go across the state to live with her boyfriend when the government could start hunting her down any day, any minute now. But, while it's foolish to even be considering it, he's actually considering letting her go.

She's old enough now, surely.

"Do you want to?"

It'll be cramped, and they'll be in each other's space twenty-four-seven, but Hopper thinks they can handle it.

"I think so."

"Then I think you should do it."

"You don't want me to stay?"

"I want you to stay if you want to stay. If you want to go off and live with Mike, then you should do that. You're not a prisoner, El. I'm not going to force you to stay if you want something else."

"Then I want to go."

"Then I guess you need to tell Mike." He smiles, and he pulls her face into his chest for a hug, chuckling when she protests (with a giggle), says he's smudging her makeup.

When the boy comes back later that evening, all fresh and spruced up for the New Year's countdown, Hopper can't help but notice the way his face lights up much like El's does when the roles are reversed, when Mike tells her something good.

He picks her up, and kisses her, and she giggles, and Hopper is proud of them.

Goddamn youngsters.

When they're twenty-three, there's nothing he can do about it anymore (not that he would want to even if he could.) They're inevitable, and he has no complaints when they're locked in an embrace on the front step of their new house.

"Mike asked me to marry him."

She says this, twisting her hands in her lap, and he can tell by the way she's looking up at him that she's waiting for his reaction with held breath.

(He doesn't mention the fact that Mike came to see him months ago, came to ask for his approval and El's hand in marriage. He doesn't mention that the boy (no, the man), had invited him to lunch, stammered his way through a whole speech only to end up sliding an heirloom ring across the table and waiting for Hopper to just get the gist.)

(He doesn't mention the way he'd held back a belly laugh, inspecting the shiny little ring in the little velvet box as though he'd been the recipient. He doesn't mention the way he'd shaken Mike's hand in approval, giving him his permission, and told him, "It's not me you should be asking".)

"You say yes?" Hopper eyes her, and he has half a mind to just pull her into a congratulatory hug before she even announces the news.

"What do you think?" El smiles, and there's a hint of a blush rising to her cheeks, and he's so fucking proud of her.

He nods, twice, and then his arms are open and he's hugging his daughter for the millionth time.

But she's older now, and she's not a little girl anymore, and she's not frightened by anything the world could throw at her.

She has her family, and she has her friends, and she has Mike. She

has Mike, who embodies both; the friends she's made over the years, the family she's built over time.

She's come so far, and she's overcome so much, and she's grown up so much that Hopper can hardly believe it sometimes.

"I'm gonna marry him."

"I know." Her dad tells her, and he places both hands on her shoulders, leaning down to her level, "I've known since you were both thirteen years old."

They get married a few months later, down by the lake.

Nobody questions the decision, not after Dustin informs them all that the drop at the quarry is where El became an official member of the Party, saved Mike's actual life and cemented the strange bond they all seem to share. Nobody questions the decision, because El plans her wedding with Nancy and Max and Joyce, and they all understand just how much every little thing means to her.

When the cake's been cut, and everyone's danced, and the married couple have officially made their getaway, Nancy pulls Hopper aside.

She's holding a glass of champagne in one hand, and a pair of strappy black heels in the other. There's a small smile on her lips, and she's kind of swaying side to side, and Hopper is positive she's trashed.

"Meet me tomorrow." She hands him her glass then, and he takes it, just long enough for her to pull a folded piece of paper from her cleavage. Nancy snatches her champagne back, swapping the note over for the glass, "I need your help."

He eyes the paper, unfolding it and staring down in bewilderment at the neatly written address in fading blue ink.

Joyce is back at his side before Nancy can say anything else, and two flutes are passed back to him as the younger woman whisks his wife off for a quick dance.

When morning comes, and he's halfway recovered, sobered up, he heads on down to the address Nancy provided him. She's stood out

front when he gets there, hands on her hips, impatient and imposing.

“You’re late.”

“You didn’t give me a time, Wheeler.” He reasons, and only then spots the moving van in the driveway of a small suburban house. “What is this? You asking me to moving you with you? I’m flattered.”

It’s a small, white, picket-fenced house in a quaint neighbourhood. The neighbours houses are similar, but they don’t quite match. This one though, this one has something charming about it. There’s something awfully precious about the lace curtains hanging in the windows, and the pale green fence that leads to what he can only assume is a garden.

“It’s your daughter’s home.” Nancy tells him, and her eyes glimmer with something close to tears, her smile broad.

“No.” Hopper frowns, and suddenly the house is blurry, “No, see, there’s a ‘Sold’ sign,” he takes a couple steps over onto the patch of grass, knocks at the sign with his knuckles, “right here.”

“Who do you think bought it?” She blinks, challenging. Her arms cross over her chest, and she crinkles her nose with an amused grin, “Mike made her a home once before. You didn’t think he’d do it again?”

That nerdy, mop-haired little shit.

“He bought a house?”

“I mean the mortgage is pretty hefty, but- Yeah.” She shrugs, comes to stand beside him as he admires the front of the building. “My nerdy little brother bought your magic daughter a house.”

“Does that meant the next step is what I think it is?”

Nancy laughs, offers a simple, “maybe,” and he can’t help but join her. He’s getting older now, and his hair is greying, and he won’t lie he isn’t looking forward to becoming a grandpa someday. He’d make for a pretty cool one, he thinks. He can tell the kid war stories from ‘Nam, and all about being stuck in another dimension and the kid can

just laugh him off.

It's their choice, though. It's El choice. He's just glad he's been fortunate enough to be her guardian through everything. He's just proud of her, of who she's become.

"Okay, big guy." She taps him on the shoulder, far from the teenager who once got caught by the cops hoarding bear traps and gasoline cans in the trunk of a car, "You need to help me unpack."

Mike had told her all about the house, and it'd been Nancy's suggestion she hire a van and unload their stuff while they were on their makeshift honeymoon down in California, spending time with Max and Lucas. She'd enlisted Hopper and Steve (Deputy Sheriff, these days) to carry some of the heavier stuff, and Jonathan and Joyce were on their down with reinforcements.

Just as Steve's car pulls up in the driveway, leaving a fair amount of space between the truck and the curb, Hopper takes in a deep breath. He rubs his hands together, rolls up the sleeves of his plaid shirt, "Okay."

It's a couple days later when Mike finally pulls up to the new house and, as warned, Nancy and Hopper are waiting by the front doorstep.

The look of absolute shock, awe, that crosses El's face when realisation hits is something that'll probably stick with Hopper until the day he dies. Her eyes widen, and she cries, and she hugs Mike so tightly that nobody thinks she'll ever let go.

Nancy welcomes her new sister into the Wheeler family with a gift she'd been making in secret for years. She'd enlisted Jonathan's help back in New York, scrapbooking together a picture album filled with memories of the whole party, the kids and the teens and the adults. It's simple, but perfectly put together. She adds pictures from the wedding, writes in swirly, fancy penmanship over the album's white cover, 'Part One', and she ties ribbon around the book to wrap it up as a present.

When El takes it with a smile and a hug, eliciting a laugh from her sister-in-law, Hopper doesn't think it could ever belong in anybody

else's hands.

If Mike is the glue that holds the party together, then she is the film coating that keeps them safe, from harm and from pain.

So, when Nancy is keeping herself busy in the new living room, placing the photo album on the middle shelf of the coffee table, and Hopper is left on his lonesome in the hallway, he can't help but look over at the couple in the doorway.

They're barely through the threshold, still just on the doorstep, but El's face has never made Hopper feel so whole, complete.

"Halfway happy?" He asks, breaking the connection between the two. (They have the rest of their lives). It's worth it just to see her smile.

"Full happy." El nods once, twice, and her hands slide from Mike's chest to his neck, pulling him closer now. "Mike?"

The young man hums, brows crinkling as he admires her face, watching as she chews at her bottom lip and sighs.

"I'm happy I'm home."

"Me, too." He tells her, and it's the quietest Hopper has ever heard him. He's good, Mike Wheeler.

When El pushes up on her tiptoes to kiss her husband, Hopper takes that as his queue to leave. She's happy, and he can't ask for anything more than that.

He grins, turning back around and venturing into the living room to lend Nancy a hand.

Goddamn kids.